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ABSTRACT

A review of communication research was conducted to (1) describe and clarify the nature of empathy, (2) investigate the construct of assertiveness, (3) posit a possible relationship between empathy and assertiveness, and (4) provide possible suggestions for future research. The literature indicates that conceptualizations of empathy primarily stress an orientation toward others, while assertive communication most often places an emphasis upon the self. Although first analyses indicate a negative relation between the two constructs, empathy and assertiveness do share some essential defining characteristics. Both constructs are conceptualized as ways to facilitate human understanding, both entail recognition of another individual's thoughts and feelings, and both involve the notion of appropriateness and flexibility in manifesting empathic and assertive communication. Some research even offers "empathic assertion" as a specific type of assertiveness to be used in appropriate situations. It appears that a threshold might exist whereby assertiveness and empathy are related linearly up to a point, after which highly empathic individuals lose sight of their own goals and exhibit nonassertive behaviors. Continued research into this relationship, as well as a curriculum in assertiveness and empathic caring for others' rights, may effectively improve some of the problems besetting contemporary society. (RL)

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Empathy and Assertive Communication

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The construct of "empathy" is extremely relevant to the field of interpersonal communication. In addition to its recognition as a primary process underlying human interaction and development (Borke, 1971), empathy has been conceived as a major component in the various conceptualizations of communicative competence (Phelps and Snavely, 1980). Leavitt and Mueller (1951) write that empathic behavior can improve communication skill, and it has been hypothesized that increased attention to the feelings of others may be indicative to interpersonal effectiveness (Pierce and Zarle, 1972). Empathy is necessary for "rhetorical sensitivity" or human understanding (Lange, 1980) as well as for a better understanding of the relationships one has with others (Dymond, 1948). Lack of empathic capacities may be a cause of inaccurate self-perceptions and the inability to communicate adequately with others (Cottrell and Dymond, 1949). Finally, empathic communication is recognized as essential within the doctor-patient relationship (Friedman, 1979); is significantly related to marital adjustment (Hobart and Klausner, 1959); and "has become the concern of practitioners in rehabilitation centers, half-way houses, crisis control programs, and other community projects where the empathizing process is an integral part of constructive communication" (Northouse, 1977, p. 176).

Although "empathy" has been conceptually and operationally defined in a variety of ways, the various definitions stress an orientation toward others as the primary criterion of the construct. A construct with an apparent antithetical criterion is that of assertiveness. In contrast to empathy, an emphasis upon the self is often primary in characterizations of assertive behavior. In its broadest sense, assertive communication refers to "all socially acceptable expressions of rights and feelings" (Lazarus, 1971, p. 39) and has been conceptualized as a way to bolster self-esteem (Phelps and Austin, 1975) and personal power (Alberti and Emmons, 1974). Manual Smith

(1975) writes that a person has the "right to be independent of the goodwill of others before coping with them [because] no matter what you or I do, someone is not going to like it; someone may even get his feelings hurt as a result" (p. 59). Although Lange and Jakubowski (1978) stress that assertive communication must entail respect for another's needs and wants as well as one's own, both definitions view the "self" as the essential aspect in assertive communication.

At first glance, it may be that a person who assertively states needs and wants will be less sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others. However, before positing a relationship between these two seemingly contradictory constructs, it is necessary to investigate and explicate the nature of empathy and assertive communication. Surprisingly, this task is quite complex.

The construct of empathy is fraught with conceptual and operational confusion, often resulting in an incomparability of research findings. The term itself has been used in the literature with a variety of meanings (Dymond, 1950), and the lack of comparability of research findings from various studies has been attributed to the exploration of different aspects of interpersonal behavior (Hobart and Fahlberg, 1965). The study of empathy has generally been dichotomized into two distinct areas: a "cognitive" approach, in which one can imaginatively take the role of another in order to recognize and understand the other's thoughts and feelings, and an "affective" approach, in which one experiences, feels, and/or responds to another's emotions (Mehrabian and Epstein, 1972). These two approaches have been recognized and labeled as: 1) cognitive/emotional; 2) understanding/feeling; and 3) person perception/avicarious response (Mehrabian and Epstein, 1972; Keefe, 1976; Hoffman, 1977).

It is appropriate to point out that while many researchers have utilized the "cognitive/affective" dichotomy as mutually exclusive, one can never treat

the "cognitive properties" (thinking, role-taking, understanding) and "affective properties" (feeling, emotional arousal, physiological responses) as fully separate and distinct. Just as emotional states can "color" one's thinking, the definition and labeling of affective properties involves cognitive processes. Borke (1978) has written that Piaget conceived of affective acts as never totally devoid of comprehension and intellectual acts as never unaffected by emotion. Davitz (1969) has stated that:

> Perceptual-cognitive processes are involved in emotional experiences, thus contradicting the use of theoretical dichotomies such as thinking versus feeling, cognition versus affect, or rational versus emotional. It seems more reasonable to view "perceptual-cognitive processes as part of emotional phenomena," recognizing that certain aspects of perceptual-cognitive functioning are probably independent of emotion and certain aspects of emotion are likely to be independent of perceptual-cognitive functioning (pp. 168-169).

I contend that the complete distinction between cognitive and affective components that underly empathic communication is spurious. Past research has tended to conceptualize empathy as consisting of either understanding thoughts and feelings or an emotional experience of some sort. Upon defining empathy as either primarily cognitive or primarily affective, it should be remembered that "the distinction between emotion and cognition as referring to two clearly different kinds of processes hardly seems tenable" (Davitz, 1969), p. 146.

Keefe (1976) writes that those who stress perceptions and cognitions in defining empathy characterize its constituent components as objectivity, detachment, and analytic knowledge of another's social roles. This knowledge can be attained by imaginatively taking the role of the other (Dymond, 1950) and/or making inferences about the thoughts and feeligs of the other based

upon communication and interpretations of one's own similar behavior (Berlo, 1965).

Empathy as role-taking involves "taking another person's perspective and seeing the world as he or she sees it" (Coke, Batson, and McDavis, 1978, p. 752). Parella (1971) delineates two types of role-taking empathy: "projective" and "adoptive." Projective empathy sets the viewer in the other's place and one's "own potential response to a similar situation [is utilized] as an attempt to understand the condition of the other" (p. 208). Adoptive empathy entails adopting already established behavior on the part of the other, without interpreting how he/she would feel in like circumstances. Chmielewski and Wolf (1979) define empathy in terms of projection or "the ability to imagine oneself experiencing the events happening to another person" (p. 6) in their attempt to assess the reliability of a scale to measure role-taking ability. On the other hand, Dymond (1950) characterizes projection as antithetical to empathy since "the thoughts and feelings of the self are attributed to the other rather than those of the other being experienced" (p. 344). Dymond (1949) characterizes empathy as adoptive or "the imaginative transposing of oneself into the thinking, feeling, and acting of another" (p. 127) in creating a scale for the measurement of empathic ability. Lange (1980) recognizes both types when he relates that the achievement of empathy is due to the tentative adoption and projection of perspectives. Similarly, Stotland, Sherman, and Shaver (1971) recognize both types in their research on imaginative self-involvement and empathy. It was found that an observer's ability to empathize increases when instructed to imagine either how the other person is feeling or how he himself would feel in the other person's position. Parella (1971) suggests that much of the confusion surrounding the meaning of empathy appears to be the result of the failure to identify whether one is engaging in projective or adoptive

empathy--a failure to distinguish between the nature of the experience due to its origin in self or other.

Empathy as "social perception" is characterized as a cognitive process, in which a person is able to make inferences about the internal states of others based upon communication and interpretation of similarities between another's behavior and his or her own. Brofenbrenner, Harding, and Gallwey (1958) have employed this approach in the study of strangers' predictions about each other after a short interaction. Similarly, Gage (1952) has studied predictions of strangers regarding each others' responses to various questions after an initial, highly-structured interaction. Berlo (1965) has conceived of empathy as involving both types of "cognitive" processes:

> As we play the role of another, we combine the inference and role-taking points of view. When we role-play, we actually perform certain behaviors. From these, we can infer our own internal states; we can make inferences from our own behavior which are pertinent to the behavior of another. We then use these inferences in taking the role of another (p. 53).

While role-taking and social perception entail different conceptual definitions, both have been defined operationally as "predictive accuracy" (Dymond, 1949; Bronfenbrenner et al., 1958; Hobart and Klausner, 1959). Various instruments exist for the measurement of predictive accuracy, based upon psychological dimensions such as "abilities, adjustment, appreciations, aptitudes, attitudes, character, ego-involvement, ideals, insight, interests, morale, morality, mores, motive, social distance, social sensitivity, and tastes" (Gompertz, 1960, p. 539). These tests include the Wechsler, Rorschach, the TAT, and the California Ethnocentrism test, as well as tests designed exclusively for the measurement of empathy. The Truax Accurate Empathy Scale (AES) is based upon various "stages of empathy," and the

construct is measured on a nine-point continuum. While the validity and reliability of this scale has been questioned, Conklin and Hunt (1980) report other scales, such as the Dymond-Smith (1949) Model (consisting of a questionnaire that explores counselor perception of clients); Carkhuff's (1969) Discrimination Index (consisting of statments that vary in their "degree of understanding"); and Cline's (1960) Interpersonal Perception Films that can be used to measure predictive accuracy.

Just as "empathy as cognition" entails conceptual confusion, "empathy as affect" also is beset with inconsistencies. Empathy as affect entails an observer assuming an emotional-type experience in the other based on a variety of cues, and this perception elicits an emotional response on the observer's part. Stotland (1978) illustrates this affective component with the example of an observer who reacts emotionally, because he or she perceives that another is experiencing or about to experience an emotion. This conceptualization allows for the possibility of any type of responding emotion in the observer. For instance, an observer's feeling of joy as a response to a rival's sorrow would be an acceptable empathic response within the parameters of this conceptualization. Stotland labels this process as "contrast" empathy and compares it to "simple" empathy, whereby one matches the perceived emotion of the other. The researcher recognizes the problems inherent within this conceptualization and admits there is not much laboratory evidence for contrast empathy. Hoffman's (1977) characterization of empathy as an "vicarious, affective response to others" (p. 169) is also problematic. According to this view, a feeling towards another individual (not necessarily in response to another's emotion) may be conceptualized as empathy. Similarly, Barnett, Matthews, and Howard (1979) define empathy as the ability to "experience the emotions of another individual" (p. 211). On the surface, it appears that the experience of another's emotions may clash with an affective response to

another person or another person's emotions, and Barnett fails to elaborate upon this conceptualization. Spitzberg (1980) includes both types of affective empathy when he writes that "empathy is an emotional reaction to, or affective experience of another's emotional state" (p. 5).

While predictive accuracy is used to measure "cognitive empathy," physiological indicators and self-report measures are used to differentiate levels of empathic emotional response. These physiological indicators include the measure of vasoconstriction and GSR instruments. However, Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) relate that there is a lack of consistency between self-report measures of empathy, palmar sweating, and vasoconstriction, due to an inadequacy of the physiological measures that differentiate between various facets of emotional experiences. See Appendices A and B for conceptual relationships of cognitive and affective empathy).

It is obvious that the conceptual and operational definitions of empathy are extremely diverse and often contradictory. Gompertz (1960) writes that the concept of empathy needs an unambiguous as well as standardized definition. Clark (1980) maintains that the available literature regarding empathy neglects a clear definition and comprehensive theoretical approach. While the study of empathy has usually focused upon either the "understanding" or "feeling" approach, researchers have combined both approaches in order to serve various other functions. Buckley, Siegal, and Ness (1979) write that perspective-taking and empathy comprise altruistic behavior. Spitzberg (1980) claims that role-taking and empathic abilities contribute to the interpersonal skill of adaptiveness. However, Stotland et al. (1978) report that when empathy is defined solely in cognitive terms, the construct has little theoretical utility beyond that contributed by the cognitive functions themselves. On the other hand, if empathy merely refers to "some kind of motor mimicry" (Spitzberg, 1980, p. 5), the capacity to understand and predict another's

thoughts and feelings is minimal at best.

Rogers (1957) writes that in order to achieve empathic understanding, a therapist must sense the client's world as if it were his or her own. A therapist must also sense the client's anger, fear, or confusion without getting bound up in it. This conceptualization includes both the "understanding" and "feeling" components. In addition, Bronfenbrenner et al. (1958) call into question the notion of a single generalized ability in "empathy."

I maintain that a conceptual definition including "cognitive" (projective and/or adoptive empathy as well as social perception) and "affective" (responding to/experiencing another's affective state) components will <u>together</u> provide the most accurate predictions and most thorough understanding. A clear delineation of the precise interpersonal behavior being measured (e.g., role-taking vs. social perception, adoption vs. projection, etc.) will help alleviate the conceptual and operational confusion regarding this construct.

An understanding of the behavioral constituents of empathy is helpful in capturing the essence of its various conceptualizations. Those who communicate empathically have a high degree of listening ability (Shuster, 1979). Capacities underlying empathy include intelligence and "cue-sensitivity"; a high capacity to "listen" to feelings, moods, and words (Weinstein, 1969, p. 753.) Active listening as indicated by head nods, as well as verbal responses, contribute to empathic communication (Wiemann, 1977). Empathic people have been characterized as "emotionally expressive, outgoing, optimistic, warm people who have a strong interest in others. They are flexible people . . . [who] find they can establish rewarding affectionate relations with others" (Cottrell and Dymond, 1949).

The behavioral constituents of assertive communication have also been

identified by a variety of researchers. Although the construct of assertiveness is not as conceptually confusing as empathy, its communicative manifestations also aid in its understanding and merits inspection.

The study of assertiveness is quite recent, but it is a rapidly expanding area (Hall, 1977). Jakubowski and Lange (1978) characterize assertive communication as entailing mutual respect and interaction based on equality (as opposed to status, age, sex differences, etc.). "The assertive individual does not malign others or deny their rights [but is] open and flexible, genuinely concerned with the rights of others, yet at the same time able to establish very well his own rights" (Alberti and Emmons, 1974, p. 4).

While nonassertive communication allows others to take advantage of us, and aggressive communication leads others to become guarded and withdraw from us, assertive communication allows one to develop caring, honest, and accepting relationships with others (Jakubowski and Lange, 1978).

Aside from the distinguishing feature of respecting another's needs and wants, assertive communication is also characterized as "flexible." In other words, assertive behavior does not entail expressing one's opinion or standing up for one's rights in each and every situation. Jakubowski and Lange (1978) write that "responsible communication fits the demands of a particular context" (p. 27), and Alberti and Emmons (1970) write that "now and then you may choose not to be assertive because you notice that the person is having difficulty [or] there can be extenuating circumstances" (p. 50). Assertive communication involves the ability to choose an appropriate way to act in a particular context, rather than being limited to a single response (Adler, 1977).

Assertiveness has had a wide variety of conceptualizations (e.g., the expression of positive and negative feelings, refusal behavior, the ability to ask for favors and make demands, and the ability to initiate and continue conversations), and it can be assessed as either a personality trait or

context-specific state. This has lead to a variety of measures that study assertive communication. These include self-rating and self-report inventories (e.g., the Wolpe-Lazarus Assertiveness Questionnaire, the College Self-Expression Scale, the Rathus Assertiveness Scale) and behavioral assessments (e.g., the Behavioral Role-Playing Assertion Test and the Behavioral Assertiveness Test) (Hall, 1977).

Similar to empathy, assertiveness has been combined with other variables to serve a variety of functions. For example, assertiveness is a central component of the construct of social style. Social style refers to the patterns of actions that others can observe and agree upon when describing a person's behavior. According to this framework, people differ along the dimensions of "assertiveness" and "responsiveness," and "versatility" (or adaptability) is said to mediate the consequences of social style (Wissmiller and Lockwood, 1979). An assertive individual emphasizes his/her ideas by a change in tone of voice, exhibits dominant statements, makes statements more often than asks questions, and lets others know of his/her needs and wants (Knapp, 1978). Snavely (1980) writes that the usage of the construct of social style may allow individuals to accurately describe and adapt to the communication of others with the goal of improved communication and increased understanding.

Assertiveness has also been studied in relation to various other constructs. In conceptualizing communication style as a method of managing oneself and the environment, Bugental, Henker, and Whalen (1976) suggest that "individuals who perceive little personal control over their outcomes are more likely to demonstrate very strong displays of assertion than those who perceive high personal causation" (p. 405). Nesbitt (1979) has found that the more impersonal a situation becomes, the more likely and easier it is for an individual to assert himself. In addition, Green, Burkhart, and Harrison (1979) have found

that the more assertive the individual, the less impulsive he or she is as measured on the PRF-E paper-and-pencil test. The researchers suggest that impulsiveness may be an important component of assertiveness in real life situations.

At this point, it appears as if empathy and assertiveness share some similar features. Both constructs are conceptualized as a way to facilitate human understanding, and both entail recognition of the other individual's thoughts and feelings. In addition, both constructs involve the notion of appropriateness and flexibility in manifesting empathic and assertive communication. Interestingly enough, Lange and Jakubowski (1976) offer "empathic assertion" as a specific type of assertiveness to be used in an appropriate situation. Empathic assertiveness "involves making a statement that conveys recognition of the other person's situation or feelings and is followed by another statemnet which stands up for the speaker's rights" (Lange and Jakubowski, 1976, p. 15). It seems that the initially posited statement regarding the negative relationship between assertion and empathy may be spurious. However, Bronfenbrenner et al. (1958) write that:

> It is possible that the person who is highly perceptive of other's feelings may pay a price in terms of realizing his own capacities for creative expression and forthright social behavior. This possibility calls into question the prevailing view that the "empathic" person is one who is effective in virtually all types of interpersonal situations (p. 106).

It is possible that a threshold exists; that is, assertiveness and empathy are related linearly up to a point, but after this point the highly empathic individual loses sight of his or her own goals and exhibits what may be characterized as nonassertive behavior.

Alberti and Emmons (1974) hint at this threshold effect when they write

that when an individual's "polite restraint" is too well developed, he or she may eventually become incapable of choosing to act assertively. Jakubowski and Lange (1978) also infer this relationship when they write that "we often make the error of assuming that it is the other person's positive or negative reactions that determine whether or not we have an assertive right in a situation" (p. 57).

Obviously, this relationship is purely conjectural, and there is a need for additional research to understand the possible relationships involved between assertive communication and empathy. Other possible relationships can be inferred from the literature. It was found that the components of social style (assertiveness, responsiveness, and versatility) allow one to adapt to the communication of others. Since adaptiveness is a prominent characteristic of empathy and assertiveness, it may be that individuals with highly adaptive social styles will be more inclined to be empathic and/or assertive in a flexible manner than individuals with less adaptive social styles. In addition, when recalling that assertive communication is easily and more likely to be manifested in impersonal situations, one can predict that the more personal a situation becomes, the easier and more likely it will be for an individual to be empathic. There may be little risk in using assertive communication in an impersonal situation, since no extant relationship with other individuals involved may exist. However, in highly personal situations, the relationship may be so well developed that the consequences of assertive behavior can be somewhat accurately predicted. Therefore, there may be less risk in displaying assertive communication in highly impersonal situations. Similarly, assertiveness may decrease to a certain point or range and subsequently increase positively with increases in the personal nature of the situation. Finally, keeping in mind that the more assertive an individual tends to be, the less impulsive he or she tends to be, one can conjecture a similar relationship

between empathy and impulsiveness. It may be that increasing levels of empathy as well as increasing levels of assertiveness are related to decreasing levels of impulsiveness. Taking the "time" to assert oneself and/or empathize with another individual may inhibit impulsive tendencies.

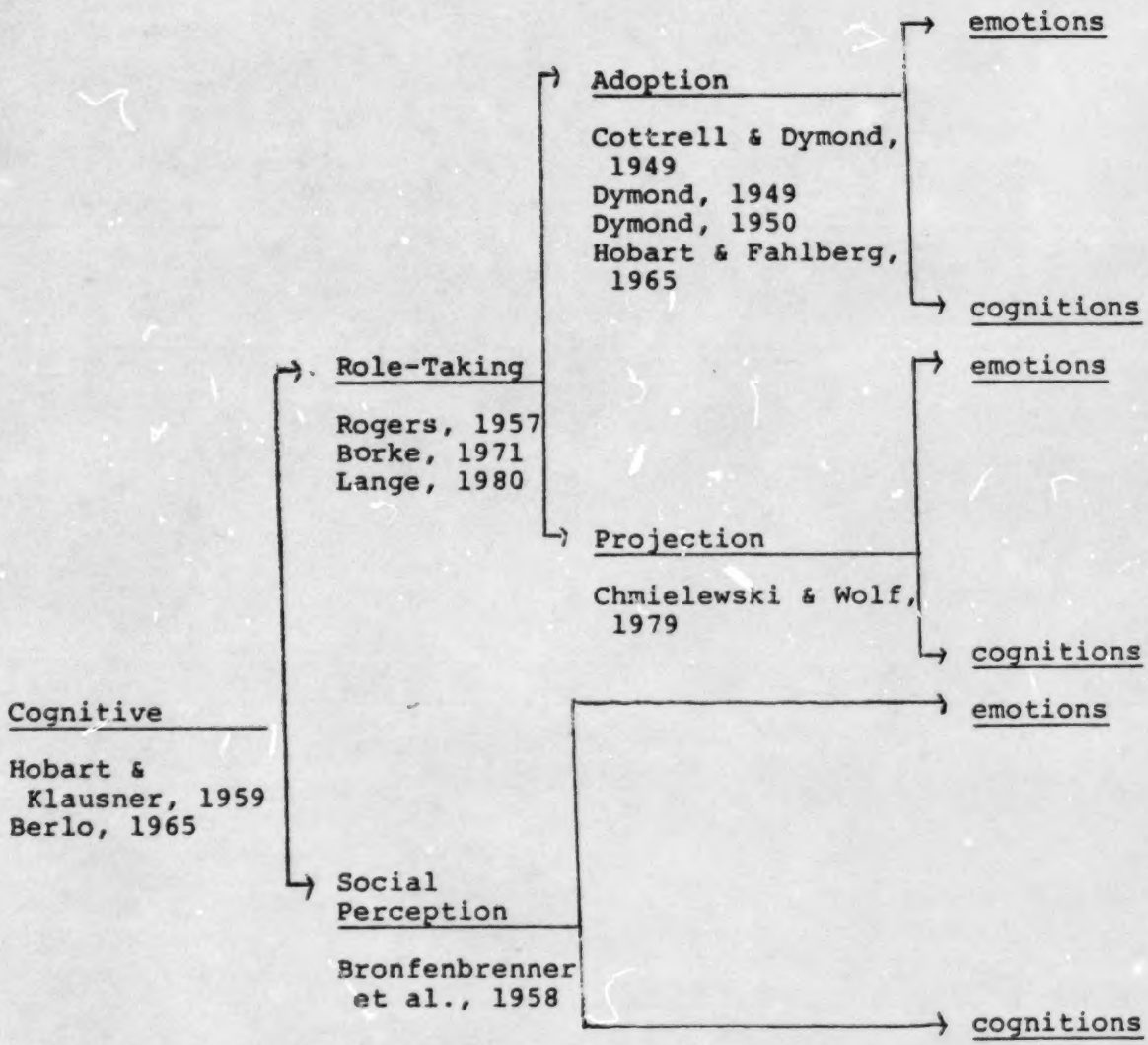
Some of these relationships have already been implied. For instance, Jakubowski and Lange (1978) write that taking a few moments to put oneself in another's shoes in order to understand his or her point of view can reduce the impulse for an immediate response. While the researchers link this assumption to aggressive communication, taking the time to ascertain whether or not to communicate assertively and/or trying to understand another's thoughts and feelings may act to inhibit any sort of impulsive response. Of course, further theoretical and empirical research is needed in order to support or reject these relationships.

The importance of studying these relationships is quite clear. Non-asserters who do not express themselves pay for this inhibition in several ways. In a study of 800 university and high school students, Zimbardo (1977) found that 82% described themselves as having shy dispositions. These shy people exhibited an inability to stand up for their rights and suffered a sense of social isolation. Psychological tolls also exert themselves on nonassertive people. "Inept communication," or the inability to express the full range of feelings, leads some to take refuge in impersonal activities, develop cynical attitudes, and despair at themselves. This despair can result in depression, emotional breakdown, or even suicide (Bach and Goldberg, 1974). Similarly, the aggressive person may lack a sense of self-worth, and aggressive communication can mask self-doubts and guilt (Alberti and Emmons, 1974). These problems can be alleviated if one is taught to act assertively and maintain sensitivity to the thoughts and feelings of others. Vasconcellos (1974) writes that the goal of self-esteem and questions of "humaness" are the most

important issues in education today. If it is not possible to teach individuals to build self-esteem, increase self-understanding, and facilitate honest and caring communication with others, "we simply aren't going to resolve our major social problems: violence, drugs, racism, sexism, and war" (Vasconcellos, 1974, iii). A curriculum that teaches assertiveness and empathic caring for others' rights may effectively improve some of the problems besetting today's society.

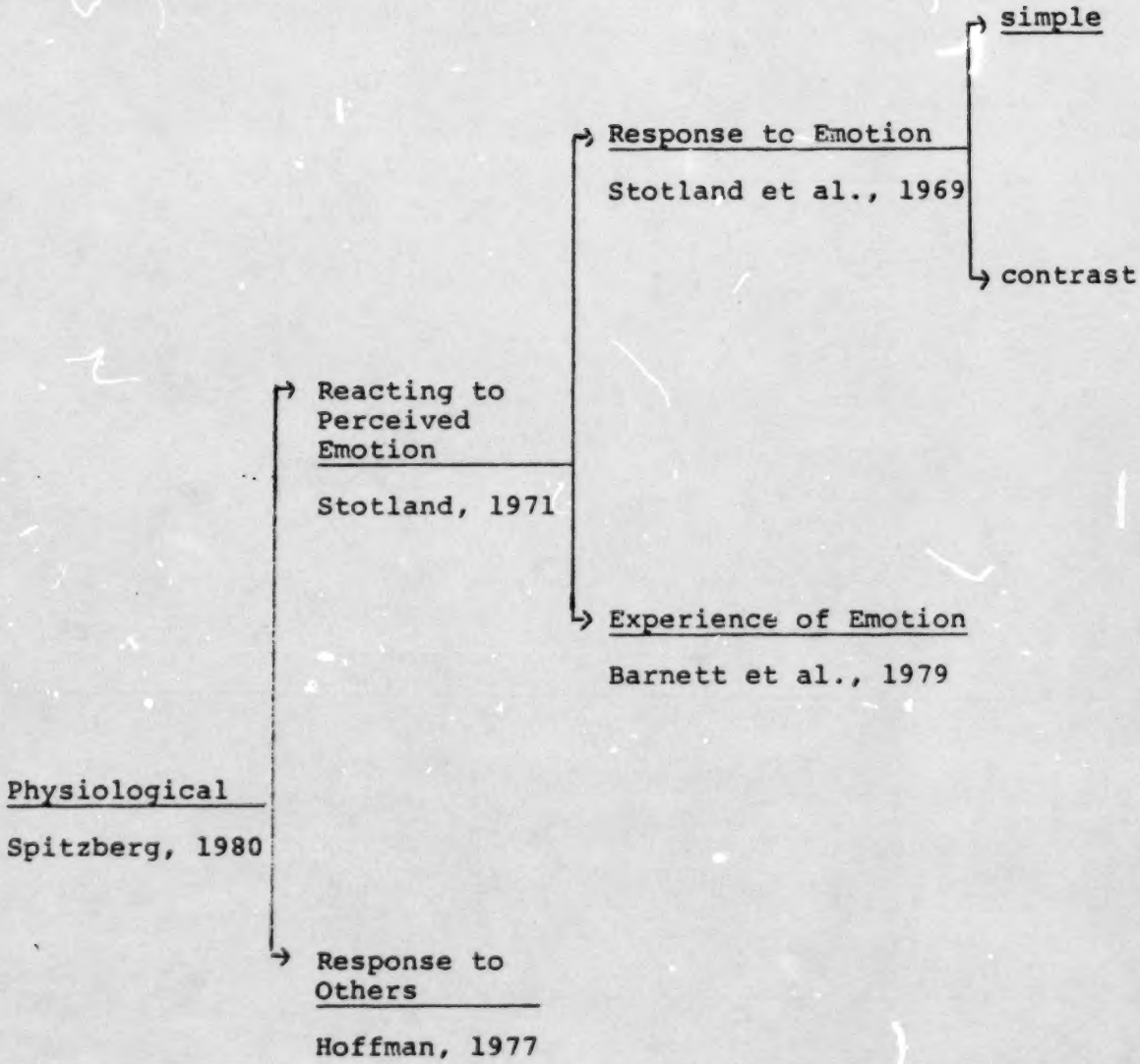
Appendix A

"Cognitive" Empathy



Appendix B

"Affective" Empathy



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